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WESTERN HEMISPHERE

Latin America: Cooperation Among Southern Cone Countries

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Circumstance and mutual interest are drawing leaders of the southern cone countries of Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, and Paraguay into closer political and economic cooperation. The army-controlled governments of these countries share a ubiquitous fear of communist subversion, a growing feeling of isolation from the rest of the world, and a concern that they are being abandoned by the US.

Brazil and Bolivia are beginning to participate in the relationship, but have reservations for one reason or another. A close-knit alliance of these countries could have important implications for the US.

The southern cone regimes purport to be "democratic," but are clearly authoritarian. The men in power do not get their support from political groups, but from the military.

The system is "democratic" in that "law" determines the proper distribution of individual, social, and political rights. There is no question, however, that the military determines the limit of those rights.

Most of the military leaders are convinced they can exert a modernizing influence on government through increased efficiency and rationality. Most believe they are better qualified to govern than civilian politicians.

The views of these military leaders seem to be coalescing into a still-unformulated philosophy of military administration in which an abhorrence of disorder, distrust of the old politics, and dedication to social and economic progress are the driving forces.

Fear of Subversion

The military leaders believe the primary national concern should be security. The principal enemies are leftist terrorism and international communism. Preserving the nation, in their view, must take precedence over personal well-being and individual freedom.

The preoccupation with security may seem excessive, but for the countries that have participated in a struggle against terrorists, the fight is real. One often-quoted statistic, for instance, is that political violence in Argentina took more lives last year than the total killed in Northern Ireland during the past five years. All of the southern cone countries, to one extent or another, feel threatened by subversion.

Isolation

Most of the countries suffer from a poor image in the world press and in international forums. The military governments are variously described as "totalitarian" and "fascist." One Brazilian government official lamented to US embassy officers that the Israelis are praised for staging a raid into Africa against terrorists, but similar counterterrorist activities in Brazil are called excessive and cruel in the world press.

Leaders in the southern cone also believe that investigations by unofficial and official bodies such as Amnesty International and the UN Commission on Human Rights are over-zealous and misguided. The leaders think they should have the right to eliminate terrorists without foreign interference.

Chilean leaders in particular are weary of "international interference," and profess to see the recent murder in Washington of former ambassador Letelier as part of a plot to discredit the nation. All of these countries believe they are the victims of an international campaign led by the communists.

Close Cooperation

The original impetus for cooperation among the southern cone countries probably came from Chile. Following the coup in 1973, the Chilean regime was anxious to acquire friends and military equipment for protection against a perceived threat from Peru.

The Chileans first approached Brazil and came away with the belief that Brasilia at least would help indirectly if Chile were invaded. Santiago then approached Bolivia and proposed renewed talks on an outlet to the sea. Diplomatic relations between the two countries were re-established in February 1975.

The military coup in Argentina last March brought Buenos Aires into step with its neighbors. The Argentines increasingly began talking of "new realities" in hemisphere affairs and cooperation among all of the southern cone countries including Brazil.

After a period of concentration on the internal security situation and the economy, the Argentine government finally felt secure enough early this summer to implement some new foreign policy initiatives. In June, the Foreign Ministry sent carefully selected ambassadors to Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, and Paraguay. High Argentine officials also began visiting around the continent to discuss topics of mutual interest.

The security organizations of the southern cone countries were already cooperating in actions against political refugees and terrorists. This program apparently began in 1974 when security officials from Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, Paraguay, and Bolivia agreed to establish liaison channels and to facilitate the movement of security officers to and from each country.

The campaign against subversion was intensified in June when the group met to plan further cooperation. Brazil participated in these discussions and reportedly agreed to become a member.

The extent of security cooperation was evident this summer during several incidents in which joint countersubversive operations were mounted against refugees and terrorists.

Security cooperation reportedly now has been augmented by an agreement among the governments of Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Paraguay, and Uruguay to coordinate positions on international political matters, particularly the threat posed by terrorism and communism. The coordination will be conducted secretly so that each country will appear to be operating in an independent manner. The group hopes to bring Brazil into the arrangement.

Current Status of Cooperation

Diplomatic activity in the southern cone has continued. Argentina and Brazil reportedly have had discussions on creating a "South Atlantic Treaty Organization." This naval alliance is envisaged as a defense of the South Atlantic against the Soviet-Cuban presence in southern Africa. The Brazilians, so far, have dismissed talk of an alliance as nonsense, but rumors persist.

Argentina and Paraguay agreed this month to increase trade by eliminating customs barriers. They also said they would stimulate complementary joint industrial projects. President Videla met

with Uruguayan President Mendez and agreed to increase cooperation between the two governments in all bilateral fields. Videla is scheduled to visit Chile and Bolivia at the end of this month.

Chilean diplomacy continues to be directed against Peru, but improved relations between Lima and Santiago have diminished the urgency of the Chilean effort. Santiago is continuing to talk with Bolivia about an outlet to the sea. Chilean willingness to discuss the problem and Peruvian intransigence have improved relations between Santiago and La Paz.

Chile is working to increase trade relations with Paraguay and Uruguay. It is already involved in a Joint Integration Commission with Argentina and also hopes to increase trade with Buenos Aires. Santiago has concluded that the Andean Pact restricts development and that there is a better market for Chilean products in the southern cone.

Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay also have been discussing trade and cooperation. Brazil and Paraguay already are involved in the construction of the Itaipu hydroelectric project on the Parana River. Paraguay and Uruguay have just launched a joint commission whose first task is to eliminate customs restrictions between the two countries.

Many intangibles will affect the extent of southern cone cooperation. There are many reasons why these countries would be drawn together in some sort of an alliance, but there are also old antagonisms.

The great imponderable is Brazil—the only country in the area with true global aspirations. Until now, Brasilia has been lukewarm toward an extensive alliance with neighboring countries. Whether or not Brazil can be enticed into joining the group may be one key factor in the extent and direction of southern cone cooperation. A lasting improvement in relations between Argentina and Brazil would be a difficult hurdle under any conditions, but the leaders of both nations may now be prepared to embark on the task.

Continued perception of mutual interest among all of these countries is the most important element in the future of an alliance. A prolongation of terrorist activities in the southern cone, obviously, will drive these countries into further cooperation.

Continued US criticism for human rights violations will heighten the sense of abandonment already prevailing in the area and intensify the feeling of isolation and frustration. This could foster closer cooperation and increasing protests against US interference in internal affairs.

Chilean and Uruguayan leaders have already suggested publicly that their continued swallowing of criticism from the US on human rights issues is not worth the limited assistance they now get from Washington.

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ARGENTINA

Counterinsurgency Effort

Rightist repression by Argentine police and security services is reportedly an integral part of the government's overall counterinsurgency effort. Earlier, it had appeared that abuses had been caused by over-zealous security officials operating independently from the government.

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all security and military services are involved and are cooperating more effectively now than before. Leftist terrorists are the principal targets, but countersubversive units also operate against leftist sympathizers and others who might give aid to the terrorists.

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President Videla and other senior military officers apparently condone these activities. Not all authorized operations are legal, even under the broad state of siege provisions in force, but senior officers believe reining in those involved would dangerously disrupt the success of the counterinsurgency effort.

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even the non-official rightist groups now operating in the country belong to authorized counterinsurgency units and have a "clearly approved mission from higher authority."

all counterinsurgency efforts by the federal police have approval from higher authority and that no records are kept on detained individuals.

The killing in August of 30 suspected subversives and the subsequent public display of their bodies was reportedly approved by the commanding general of the Buenos Aires regional army corps, the chief of the federal police, and the police force's top security officer. President Videla was said to be disturbed not so much by the killing of the supposed subversives, but by the publicity it was given.

Advocates of such harsh tactics view the success the security forces have had against the left in recent months as justification for their methods. The hard-liners will probably take the apparent terrorist attempt to assassinate Videla last weekend as proof of the need for further strong measures.

President Videla pins a medal on soldier wounded in combat against leftist guerrillas in Tucuman Province

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